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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 000129

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TAGS: PHUM SREF PGOV PROP PREL KS KN
SUBJECT: FUTURE ROLE FOR NORTH KOREAN DEFECTORS
FACILITATING UNIFICATION?: ROK OFFICIALS DISMISSIVE

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: As the total number of North Korean defectors in South Korea crossed the 15,000 threshold in 2008, some scholars, NGOs, and defectors themselves asked whether the former North Korean residents could play a useful role promoting change of the North Korean regime and facilitating eventual unification of the Korean Peninsula. While there is a nascent, but growing activism among defectors who see themselves as naturals for these tasks, present and past ROKG officials dismiss the possibility of a significant defector role. Even some leading defectors acknowledge that defectors are not yet ready to assume such a responsibility. Defector NGO groups have grown in number, but they are weakened by the lack of a unifying agenda or approach to inter-Korean issues. End Summary.

¶2. (C) According to the ROK Ministry of Unification (MOU), South Korea took in 2,809 North Korean defectors in 2008 -- the most ever -- pushing the total number of defectors to 15,057. As the defectors are quite familiar with all things North Korean, pundits and experts have tapped into their information base, promoting their favored agenda and cause. In the process, some pundits and experts, especially those from outside Korea, see a role for the defectors to promote change in the DPRK and, ultimately, facilitate a transition to a unified peninsula. Scholar and long-time North Korea observer Andrei Lankov, for example, advocates cultivation of a cadre of North Korean defectors for such a task through exchange programs and expanded educational support. The International Republican Institute (IRI) has already conducted small capacity-building workshops for defectors, aiming to empower them both to improve their lives in South Korea and to play a useful post-unification role at some point in the future. Some defector activists share this optimistic view of their future possibilities, reasoning that their intimate personal knowledge and experience of life in both Koreas uniquely qualifies them for a role in the transition to unification. This argument does not appear to hold sway, however, with many South Koreans, who tend to see the defectors as a burden: poor, needy, and maladjusted.

Defector NGO Overview

¶3. (C) South Korean NGOs involved in DPRK-related activity generally fall into two camps: one progressive-leaning, humanitarian, and pro-engagement; the other conservative, human rights-oriented, and eager to hasten the collapse of the North Korean regime. Virtually all politically active defectors tend to associate with, and in some cases lead,

groups in the latter category. These defector-led organizations include radio broadcasters (Free North Korea Radio, North Korea Reform Radio), leafleters (Fighters for Free North Korea and Association of North Korean Defector Organizations), human rights advocates (Committee for the Democratization of North Korea), former prison camp internees (Campaign for North Korean Freedom), escaped North Korean elites (North Korean Intellectuals Solidarity), and women's rights advocates (Committee for North Korean Women's Rights).

Though they share a desire to promote change in the North, they are by no means a cohesive bunch and are often critical of one another.

"Aquariums" Author Kang: Defectors Get No Respect

¶ 14. (C) Kang Chul-hwan, who survived one of the harshest North Korean political prison camps and wrote about it in "The Aquariums of Pyongyang," estimated that defectors need about a decade simply to assimilate into South Korean society. Knowing South Korea and its people and understanding its capitalist mentality were prerequisites for assumption of any future, post-unification leadership role in either of the Koreas, he said.

¶ 15. (C) Kang described how defectors' status in South Korean eyes had fallen over the years. Compared to 1992, when he reached the ROK, recent arrivals had it "much tougher." Back then, defecting individuals and military officers were issued "Defector Warrior" cards, which elicited respect and praise from South Koreans, but in 1994 the identification cards were "downgraded" from "Defector Warrior" status to just "defectors." As defector numbers and ROKG funding and scholarships for defectors increased in the late 1990s, Kang noticed a clear turning point in public perception of North Korean defectors, as respect changed to disinterest to disrespect. Since 2000, North Korean defectors have been treated as second-class citizens, Kang said.

¶ 16. (C) While North Korean defectors were not yet ready to "help (South) Korea," Kang believed the defector community could play a positive role in the future -- in time and with training. In a post-unification era, North Koreans would be better received in the North than South Koreans in guidance-providing roles, Kang thought.

IT Ph.D. Kim: Elites Ready to Make a Difference Now

¶ 17. (C) Apparently rejecting the notion that they are "not yet ready" to take on the leadership role, a growing number of defectors are trying to plant seeds of change in North Korea now. Holder of a North Korean doctorate in information technology, Kim Heung-kwang serves as chairman of North Korean Intellectuals Solidarity (NKIS), a group of more than 150 elite defector intellectuals in South Korea that he founded in October 2008, after reaching out to other educated defectors since his arrival in 2004. Twenty percent of its members either hold or are pursuing Master's or Doctorate degrees; the group aims to promote change in the DPRK by targeting its elite class with messages and information surreptitiously packaged in DVDs, USB thumb drives, and MP3 files. Kim told polooffs that his attempts to solicit support from the ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS) had not gone well due to ideological differences and NIS leaks of sensitive information. He had been in Japan the previous week asking an abductee NGO for funding. Kim was featured on the Japanese NHK BS1 evening news program "Kyou no Sekai" (Today's World) on January 22. His recent acceptance of a visiting professorship at Gyeonggi University notwithstanding, Kim, like many elite defectors, feel their expertise, skills, and potential to effect change in the DPRK are under-appreciated by the South. Kim closed with a plea for U.S. funding.

Leafleters: Bang for the Bucks?

¶18. (C) The area of defector activity attracting the most attention in South Korea is leafleting. NGO Fighters for Free North Korea Chair Park Hak-sang's fall 2008 deliveries of large air balloons carrying several thousand anti-Kim Jong Il leaflets (many with one-dollar bills attached) across the DMZ drew unusually strong condemnation from the DPRK, which demanded that the ROKG stop Park's leafleting activities. The ROKG's ostensible search for a legal basis to stop the balloons failed and Park continued, sending 100,000 "Balloon postcards" to North Korea on December 3, 2008. The next balloons are set to fly in February, this time laden with North Korean won-bearing leaflets.

¶19. (C) Presently taking a hiatus from leafleting to comply with ROKG wishes and to wait for more favorable spring winds, Association of North Korean Defector Organizations (ANKDO) leaders are also very optimistic about the potential role that North Korean defectors could play in a post-unification era. Conceding that the defector community is "not yet ready" to lead, ANKDO Chairman Han Chang-kweon nevertheless stressed that defectors would be best positioned to bring about change in North Korea and ought to be empowered accordingly. ANKDO is an umbrella organization representing 28 smaller NGOs that support North Korean defectors.

ROK Officials Not Impressed

¶10. (C) Overall, ROK officialdom is dismissive of the possibility of a positive unification-related role for defectors, being more concerned with the challenges defectors present to the South's welfare and educational systems. Former Unification Minister Park Jae-kyu told poloffs on January 9 that what to do with North Korean defectors outside Korea was a "huge problem" for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) and predicted that it could grow into an even bigger headache unless the ROK changed its current practice of universal acceptance of North Korean defectors. Park estimated over 90 percent of defectors were unable to adapt successfully to life in South Korea, adding that many suffered from mental and physical health problems. To expect this group to play a productive mid to long-term role in Korean unification was unrealistic, he said. As Unification Minister during the Sunshine Policy days of Kim Dae-jung, Park had overseen implementation of a more selective ROK policy on accepting defectors, he said.

¶11. (C) The South Korean public, Park continued, was "psychologically not ready for defectors," and was certainly not prepared to accept them as leaders of any sort. To think that the adjustment process would be effortless because "defectors are also Koreans" would be a "naive and irresponsible" notion. Informal comments made in a separate meeting with MOU officials seemed to bear this out. North Korean neighbors they could live with, they agreed, but they would not stand for seeing one of their children marry one. Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Yong-joon echoed former Minister Park's opinion that acceptance of virtually all defectors who wish to settle in South Korea coupled with ROKG resettlement incentives had attracted less desirable defectors to the ROK.

Broadcasters: Kept at Arm's Length by ROKG

¶12. (C) Former DPRK propagandist Kim Seong-min spearheaded development of the largest of the defector-associated broadcasters, Free North Korea Radio (FNK), though he has turned over responsibility for the radio portion of his expanding operation to another defector, Lee Keum-ryong. Employing 13 defectors and planning to increase total staff from 15 to 20, FNK now broadcasts five hours per night and produces over 50 different programs on everything from current events, useful life skills, and women's rights to

defector testimonies, statistical comparisons of the North and South, lectures by well-known North Korea specialists, and English and Mandarin lessons. All programs are hosted by defectors speaking in North Korean dialect. Kim and his FNK colleagues have branched out into other activity, too, including an online clearinghouse of North Korea-related information, images, and videos (some from FNK's North Korea contacts) called NK Information Center (www.fnkinf.com) and a defection support operation enlisting the assistance of a team of trusted brokers and contacts in Vietnam and Cambodia.

Ignored by mainstream South Korean press, FNK was recognized and awarded for its work by Reporters Without Borders in December.

¶13. (C) Not all have been pleased with FNK Radio's activities; employees discovered a "bloody axe" on the station office's doorstep one day and the office now receives constant police protection. Kim claimed in a December meeting with poloff that those responsible for sending threatening mail to FNK in the past had since been arrested under the National Security Law. Initially wary of the police, Kim said he now gets along well with them and believed that elements of the NIS approve of their broadcasting efforts. Many who logged on to the NK Information Center website, he noted, were from the NIS. A female defector that worked for FNK two years ago, he said, was in fact later recruited by the NIS, which employed other defectors as well.

¶14. (C) Radio Free Chosun (RFC) president, the non-defector conservative activist Han Ki-hong, likewise told poloff in December that the broadcaster had close relations with the NIS, friendlier now under President Lee Myung-bak than under previous administrations. Also like FNK, RFC monitored defector responses to its broadcasts and adjusted programming content accordingly, tailoring the contents to those mostly likely to listen in: intellectuals, students, black marketeers. Part of a larger organization encompassing small publisher NKnet and online North Korea news source The Daily NK, RFC creates about 15 programs in-house on such topics as the North Korean economic situation, stages of transition to a new regime, music, and dramas, broadcasting for an hour and a half per day. Ten employees worked on radio programs in one capacity or another and RFC aimed to have defectors broadcast 70-80 percent of its programming in North Korean dialect.

¶15. (C) One of two other smaller, but notable, broadcasters is North Korea Reform Radio, a two-person operation run by 1990s defector Kim Seung-chul producing 1 hour of programming per day targeted at North Korean leadership elites. The other is Open Radio, run by South Korean Young Howard, who employs two or three defectors and broadcasts two hours per day.

Comment

¶16. (C) North Korean defectors have been quite successful in forming groups and organization to publicize repression back home. Broadcasting is probably the most successful model, attracting funds and interest from South Korean conservative groups and foreign human rights and religious activists. Understandably, these defector groups see themselves as trailblazers and their work as preparation for leadership roles in a unified Korea. This, however, is not a view their southern compatriots share, who see a divided defector community without much depth or leadership. Correct or not, South Koreans also assume that North Koreans will not respond well to the returnees.

STEPHENNS